

Buffalo Theatre Ensemble

Presents

Birthday Candles

By Noah Haidle



Directed by Steve Scott

One Woman. One Cake. One Hundred Years of Life.

Buffalo Theatre Ensemble sincerely thanks the library for research support, for classes studying the script and production, as well as for the cast, director, and production team working on the project.

Note: Contains adult themes and language

Table of Contents

Play/Production Information

Brief Synopsis	3
Time and Place	3
Characters	3
Birthday Candles Director's Note	4

About the Playwright: Noah Haidle

Articles for your Consideration

Interview with Playwright Noah Haidle	6
Do Goldfish Really Have a 3-Second Memory?	9
Playwright Noah Haidle Blows Out His Birthday Candles	11
Ritual, Memory, and the Meaning of a Life	13
The Perfect Butter Cake	14

Analysis Tools

Things to Think About Prior to Performance	17
Things to Watch for in Performance	17
Things to Think About After the Performance	17
Other Analysis Tools	18

Additional Information

Play/Production Information

Source: Haidle, Noah. *Birthday Candles*. Samuel French, an Imprint of Concord Theatricals Corp, 2022.

Brief Synopsis

Birthday Candles is a charming and heartfelt play that follows Ernestine and her family as they experience the dreams, heartbreaks and extraordinary moments that make up one woman's "ordinary" life. Each passing birthday reveals how time transforms us, as Ernestine marks a century of living with a single cake.

Time and Place

Time: One hundred years and ninety minutes concurrently, no breaks between scenes and no intermission

Place: A kitchen in Grand Rapids, Michigan. A goldfish in a bowl.

Characters

Ernestine Ashworth - Travels from age seventeen to one hundred and three. In that time she will be a daughter, a girlfriend, a wife, a mother, a friend, an aunt, a mother-in-law, a widow, a second wife, a grandmother, a great grandmother, and a great-great grandmother.

Alice - Selfless. Strong. Ernestine's mother.

Kenneth - Ernestine's awkward and annoying next door neighbor.

Matt - Chiseled jawline. A middle linebacker on the high school football team. Ernestine's boyfriend then husband.

Billy - Sensitive. An ear for music. Ernestine and Matt's son.

Madeline - Troubled. Bemused. Beautiful. Erudite. Ernestine and Matt's daughter. Played by actor playing Alice.

Joan - Anxious. Very anxious. Billy's wife.

Alex - Takes no bullshit. Billy and Joan's daughter. Played by actor playing Joan.

Ernie - Ethereal. Vivacious. She doesn't walk, she glides. Alex's daughter. Played by actor playing Alice and Madeline.

William - Thirteen. Grand. Played by actor playing Matt.

John - A man woken up in the middle of the night. Played by actor playing Billy.

Beth - John's domestic partner, she quit smoking ten years ago and hasn't been in a good mood since. Played by actor playing Joan and Alex.

***Birthday Candles* Director's Note**

Meet Ernestine Ashworth. When we first meet her, it is her 17th birthday, a day for cake (made from her grandmother's recipe) and contemplation - of the relative insignificance of her life so far and her dreams for future greatness. As she moves through successive birthdays, we watch her experience the high and low points that we all experience: the excitement of first love, the challenges of nurturing a family, the tragedies of unexpected loss, the triumphs of new life – and the ritual of baking that never-changing cake, a lifeline to the past and a grounding for the unknown, unknowable future.

On one level, Noah Haidle's play is as simple as the ingredients in that cake: an exploration of the hopes, realities, exuberant victories and crushing disappointments that we all find in our own lives. But through its portrait of four generations of a "typical" family, *Birthday Candles* becomes something much, much more: a bracing, heartbreaking and often absurdly funny rendering of our connections to the mysteries of the past and future, and the grand patchwork that is human existence.

Steve Scott
Director



Cast, Designers, and Directors meet for the first Rehearsal of *Birthday Candles* at Buffalo Theatre Ensemble (Photo by Rex Howard Photography)

About the Playwright: Noah Haidle

BY DANIEL MILLHOUSE (BTE INTERIM MANAGING ARTISTIC DIRECTOR)

Playwright Noah Haidle is known for crafting stories that transform the ordinary into the extraordinary, inviting audiences to see the passage of time, and the meaning of a life, with fresh perspective and wonder. With *Birthday Candles*, Haidle offers a deeply human and quietly profound meditation on existence, memory, and the small moments that shape who we are.

Haidle's work has been produced across the United States and internationally, earning recognition for its poetic imagination, emotional depth, and distinctive theatricality. His plays, including *Mr. Marmalade*, *Smokefall*, and *Persephone*, often explore the intersection of reality and imagination, blending humor and heartbreak in ways that feel both intimate and expansive. His writing resists easy categorization, moving fluidly between the surreal and the deeply grounded to illuminate the complexities of human experience.



A graduate of Princeton University and the Juilliard School, Haidle has received numerous honors for his work, including the Whiting Award for Drama. His plays have been developed and produced at major institutions such as Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Goodman Theatre, South Coast Repertory, and the Manhattan Theatre Club, among others. Across these stages, his voice has remained unmistakable - curious, compassionate, and attuned to the rhythms of life as it unfolds over time.

In *Birthday Candles*, Haidle distills many of his recurring themes into a single, elegant theatrical gesture - the life of Ernestine Ashworth, told through a series of birthdays that span nearly a century. The play's structure, at once simple and deeply complex, allows audiences to witness how love, loss, ritual, and memory accumulate, creating a portrait of a life that is both singular and universal.

What makes Haidle's work especially resonant is his ability to elevate the everyday. In his world, baking a cake, sharing a conversation, or marking another year can become acts of quiet significance. *Birthday Candles* reminds us that life is not defined solely by its milestones, but by the countless small moments in between - moments that, when viewed together, reveal something extraordinary.

With this play, Noah Haidle invites us not only to observe a life, but to reflect on our own, how we measure time, what we carry forward, and what it means to truly be present in the fleeting, beautiful span of a human life.

Articles for your Consideration

Interview with Playwright Noah Haidle

BY TED SOD

Source: Sod, Ted. "Interview with Playwright Noah Haidle." Interview with – Roundabout Theatre Company, www.roundabouttheatre.org/get-tickets/upstage-guides-current/birthday-candles/interview-noah-haidle.

In late 2019, now-retired Education Dramaturg Ted Sod spoke with Noah Haidle about Birthday Candles in anticipation of the planned 2020 production of the show. Haidle edited his responses in early 2022.

TED SOD: Where were you born and educated? How and when did you realize you wanted to write for the theatre?

NOAH HAIDLE: I was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where *Birthday Candles* is set. Growing up I was not a creative kid, I didn't go to the theatre outside of seeing my brother in a murder mystery performed in the high school cafeteria. I read *Death of a Salesman* in my junior year and said, "I'm totally gonna do that." Having no idea how one becomes a playwright, I decided to go to the public library and to read everything. The Pulitzer Prize for Drama began in 1918 with the non-classic *Why Marry?* by Jesse Lynch Williams. I figured that was a good place to start. There was no prize awarded in 1919, but then *Beyond the Horizon* by Eugene O'Neill won in 1920, and then...and then...I read at least one play a day for years, operating under the theory that if I took on enough information, someday I'd be able to synthesize something myself.

I went to Princeton (I am contractually obligated to say within the first five minutes of every conversation that I went to Princeton, or they strip me of my degree), where I met Christopher Durang when I was 19. In my application for his class I said I had recently stolen a copy of *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You* from Barnes and Noble. I guess he thought that was funny because he let me in. A few years after graduation I went to the Juilliard playwriting program headed by Chris and Marsha Norman, which was heaven. A couple years after that my play *Mr. Marmalade* was produced at Roundabout's Steinberg Center off-Broadway. It went so poorly with both critics and audiences that they created Roundabout Underground.

When *Mr. Marmalade* was in previews, I went to the bathroom during intermission and the gentleman at the urinal next to me said, "Worst play ever." Gulp. Instead of a rebuttal, I blurted, "I know -- right?" I have never used a lobby bathroom since. I will go across the street to a Subway sandwich shop, or use a catheter, anything to avoid another gentleman turning and expressing a similar sentiment, although at the age of 43 maybe I'd have the self-confidence to disagree.

TS: *Mr. Marmalade* remains one of the most polarizing pieces we've produced. For every person who couldn't deal with it, there is another person who adored it. I still hear people talk about this play to this day.

NH: Unfortunately, I didn't meet any of those that adored it; maybe you'll introduce me next time you see them. I'm dubiously proud that the terrible reception of my first professional play helped launch the careers of so many distinguished playwrights. The symmetry of my first play going so badly that a theatre would create a new program for emerging writers, and now this new play going to Broadway more than 15 years later is one of the most beautiful things that's ever happened to me. Everybody loves a comeback.

TS: *Birthday Candles* encapsulates what a full life looks like. What inspired you to write it?

NH: Three things (that I'm consciously aware of, anyway). When I was 19, I read that goldfish have a three second memory span, when I was 34 I read that Arthur Schopenhauer spent the last years of his life alone in Frankfurt, Germany playing the violin to his dog Atman (the name of the goldfish in *Birthday Candles*). Third, somewhere in my self-assigned course of study, I encountered Thornton Wilder's *A Long Christmas Dinner*. I straight up stole the conceit of that play and used it for *Birthday Candles*, dropping in on certain birthdays of a woman from age 17 to 107 as Mr. Wilder's play drops in on certain Christmases in the life of a family. Through another bit of good luck, the heads of Wilder's estate, Rosey Strub and Tappan Wilder, read *Birthday Candles* and gave it their blessing. As T.S. Eliot wrote, minor poets borrow, major poets steal.

TS: I want to ask you about how this play came to be commissioned. Can you talk us through that process?

NH: A few years ago, three talented and brave women - Sarah Winkler, Sarah Clare Corporandy and Courtney Burkett - started the Detroit Public Theatre. I was living in Detroit at the time, and my wife's aunt knew the founders and arranged for us to meet. When I sat down with Courtney, she said, "I bet you don't know how we know each other," and I said, "You're right." When I was still in college I had a play produced at HERE in SoHo, directed by Davis McCallum, when we were both young people. Courtney was the assistant director on that play. At first I got involved in Detroit Public Theatre not as a playwright, instead I wrote the script for a fundraiser and ran the soundboard. So when Sarah Clare asked about new play development, I said what I would never say to a standard producing organization: "All any playwright wants to hear is yes - nobody wants another reading, or a workshop, all we want to hear is yes." She took that to heart, and later that summer the three founders said, "Here's a commission, we'll produce whatever you write next spring." Their act of faith is correlative to *Birthday Candles* being pretty good.

TS: How much rewriting do you do in rehearsals?

NH: As much as possible. Part of the fun of being a living playwright is a) being alive, and b) helping out to serve the production. Any playwright who thinks that a production should be an execution of a vision is in for a tough life. Why not try to help out with what's in front of you? If the director stages a long cross, add some lines. If an actor is funny, write funnier stuff for them. Backstage at the American Airlines TheatreSM there is a leftover prop from another show, an enormous pirate. I told the crew there that I would somehow get the word pirate into *Birthday Candles*. I'm not sure how I'm going to pull that off, but we'll see...

TS: I want to talk to you about collaborating with director Vivienne Benesch. What made you want to collaborate with her on this play?

NH: How do you explain why you fall in love with someone? Vivienne is a fairy, a wizard. She's magic. When you find someone who is magic, you hitch yourself to their wagon and hope for the best.

TS: Do you have any advice for a young person who says they want to write for the theatre?

NH: Find how to take yourself seriously. It's really weird to announce to friends and family, "Hey, I'm going to be a playwright!" Mostly the reaction is a concerned look or a dismissive, "Oh, good for you." Whether it's grad school, a mentor, getting into a reading series, getting a grant... just find a manner of validation to attend family Thanksgiving and say without apology, "I'm a playwright." Other than that I'd say go to the library. Read everything but maybe skip

Why Marry?

UPSTAGE GUIDE: What impact has the experience of the pandemic had on *Birthday Candles* for you?

NH: In between the two productions my wife and I had our first child, a son named Butch. His first birthday is February 13, two days before the first rehearsal of the 2022 iteration. His life has been rather impactful.



Do Goldfish Really Have a 3-Second Memory?

BY NIVEDITHA SANKAR

Source: Sankar, Niveditha. "Do Goldfish Really Have a 3-Second Memory?" ScienceABC, 19 Oct. 2023, www.scienceabc.com/nature/animals/do-goldfish-really-have-a-3-second-memory.

The minuscule memory of goldfish is a myth. Though we don't know where this myth came from, we do know that goldfish have much longer memories, significantly longer than a few seconds. Research has shown that goldfish can remember objects for weeks and can use landmarks to remember where to find food.

Have you ever walked into a room, and then completely forgotten what you came in for? We often compare this frustrating experience to the life of a goldfish, as though they are always forgetting what they were just doing.

But do goldfish actually have a 3-second memory? The short answer is NO.

In that case, what is their actual memory span and why do so many people still make fun of this poor fish?

Goldfish (*Carassius auratus*) that swim inside your fish tank are much smarter than you think. This myth about them being dumb has prevailed, even though scientists have known about their memory skills since 1960. In fact, people generally look down on fish, though some of them may be smarter than chimpanzees (our relatives, evolutionarily speaking).



Goldfish (Photo Credit: ikhyon Kwon/Shutterstock)

How Was This Myth Busted?

Although it's not clear where this myth comes from, it is easy to debunk it. A 15-year-old boy named Rory from Australia did a simple experiment to prove how foolish this claim truly is.

He placed a red Lego piece on one side of his fish tank and then dropped food next to it. Initially, the goldfish avoided the Lego out of fear, but after some training, it seemed to have gotten used to the foreign object. Eventually, the goldfish started associating the red Lego with food.

He tested this by feeding the goldfish for a week without putting in the Lego piece. If it had a poor memory, then Rory putting the Lego piece back in should have scared the goldfish away, just as it did the first time. However, Rory found that the fish swam towards the Lego piece faster than before, showing that these fish can effectively retain knowledge.

Scientists, over the years, have conducted many such experiments on goldfish to better understand their learning and memory capabilities.

Kevin Warburton from Australia described in his study that goldfish can use landmarks to find food faster.

Several different groups of fish were fed in identical spots in their respective fish tanks, but some had 'landmarks' to help them find the food faster. One example of a landmark was a pillar of Legos right next to where the food would be deposited. The fish that could see the landmark went to the correct spot 95% of the time, even before the food was introduced. Fish without a landmark went to the proper place first about 60% of the time, as a comparison. Not only can fish remember how to avoid the bad and seek the good, but they can also develop their own systems for remembering things, similar to how we navigate the streets in the towns where we live.

How Long Can They Actually Remember Something?

While it's hard to determine how long a goldfish can remember something from a single exposure, it's clear that they can remember and learn for extended periods of time.

A study conducted by researchers at the University of Plymouth tested goldfishes' ability to learn over a 3-month period. They first taught the goldfish to press a lever in order to get food. All the goldfish in this study managed to do so within seven days of their training, but the goldfish also learned to do something even cooler!

Researchers upped the ante by restricting the time when the food would be accessible to them. Instead of pressing the lever whenever they wanted food, goldfish only went towards the lever at the available time. While this data doesn't argue for Einstein-like intelligence, it shows that fish can certainly remember things for more than 3 seconds.

Why Do I Need To Know This?

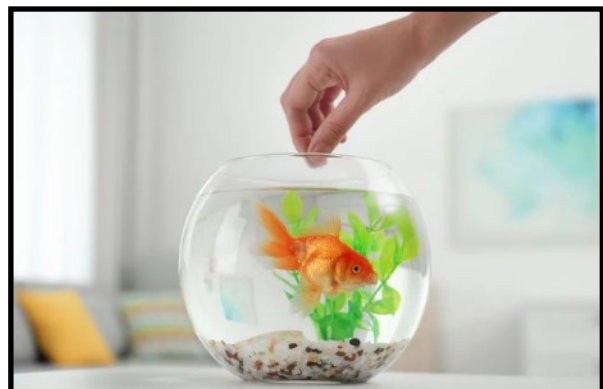
Goldfish are members of a group called ray-finned fish, which are the most diverse group of vertebrates in the world.

It's important to know how fish memory works for a variety of reasons. Perhaps you're an avid fisher and want to know how often you should switch your lures to keep that trophy bass guessing. Maybe you're worried that your water-bound pets will forget you when you go on vacation. You might even be a scientist trying to determine if your new life-saving drug impacts memory.

Several major drugs have been suspected of impairing memory, like Dizocilpine. Some researchers even set out to determine if this was the case and found that Dizocilpine did, in fact, significantly impair the memory of goldfish.

A Final Word

Finding Nemo has made us all love our water pets even more, but in reality, these fish are smarter than the movies make them out to be. The lack of interest and awareness has led to this short-memory myth being perpetrated for quite a long time. Whatever the reason for your curiosity about goldfish memory, they deserve far more credit than 3 seconds. These colorful chubby pets will always have a special place in our memory - and you might even be in theirs!



A person feeding a goldfish (Photo Credit: New Africa/Shutterstock)

Playwright Noah Haidle Blows Out His *Birthday Candles*

BY MARK KENNEDY

Source: Kennedy, Mark. "Playwright Noah Haidle Blows out His 'Birthday Candles.'" AP News, AP News, 17 Apr. 2022, apnews.com/article/covid-entertainment-health-lifestyle-debra-messing-6580834eaa4150e5227a5cc933958579.

NEW YORK (AP) - Playwright Noah Haidle's Broadway debut is all about time and yet none was on his side as the pandemic closed in.

Rehearsals for his play "Birthday Candles" were in their second week in March 2020 when his career achievement was snatched away. He had to become Zen.

"It became a private satisfaction. Any outward validation is quite nifty, but it doesn't matter," he says, thinking at the time: "I believe in the quality of this, and it's immaterial whether people see it or not."

People are finally seeing "Birthday Candles" and cheering its cosmic look at time, ritual and memory, a play that connects baking a cake to "atoms left over from creation."

The play visits and revisits one woman and her loved ones on her various birthdays as she ages from a rebellious 17-year-old to a 107-year-old great-grandmother. It stars Emmy Award-winner Debra Messing.

The play was birthed in Detroit in 2018 and worked on until just days before it opened this month. Haidle recalls an early version had ballooned to 190 pages with a "tragically bad" third part. The script is now an economical 100 pages and even includes a recipe for a cake to be made onstage.

The 43-year-old playwright is a graduate of Princeton University and The Juilliard School, a man able to quote Noam Chomsky and Buffalo Bill from "The Silence of the Lambs" with equal vigor.

In college, Haidle hated the pseudo-intellectual job of writing papers about a work's meaning - "who cares what I have to say about 'Hamlet'?" - and preferred going to the library and reading plays. He's not precious about his art.

"Remember the golfer John Daly? His theory on golf was 'grip it and rip it.' So that's my theory of playwriting - grip it and rip it," he says.

Haidle and his wife have a 1-year-old son, who took his first steps outside just before "Birthday Candles" opened. That meant he wrote a play exploring parenthood before he himself became a father. "I could imagine," he explains. "That's what playwrighting is. You make stuff up."

Shards of things that intrigue Haidle are studded throughout his work. A favorite passage from "King Lear" appears in "Birthday Candles," and the name of an onstage goldfish - Atman - comes from the name of a poodle adored by the great German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer.

“He has the highest level of philosophy and scholarship and just the most open, vulnerable heart,” says director Vivienne Benesch. “His ability to combine those things, to me, makes him an exceptional writer.”

Haidle has also written for TV - including the Showtime series “Kidding” starring Jim Carrey - and one movie, “Stand Up Guys,” starring Al Pacino, Christopher Walken and Alan Arkin. (Haidle grades it “a solid B-minus, C-plus.”)

For reasons he is not entirely sure, Haidle is better known in Germany than America. “I’ve had kind of two playwriting lives - bifurcated. I try and use that every time I talk to someone,” he jokes.

For instance, his “Mr. Marmalade” bombed in New York in 2005 - featuring a child’s imaginary friend who is violent and does cocaine - but was adored in Germany. This fall, “Birthday Candles” will be his 10th play performed in Germany.

“American playwriting? I’ve done OK,” he says. “Over there, I’m the best-known American playwright.” One review in a German newspaper had the headline: “Chekhov, Beckett, Haidle.”

Haidle, whose other plays include “Saturn Returns” and “Smokefall,” is not a playwright who delivers a script and then heads for the exit. He likes working with the director and actors to shape the play until it’s ready, as well as listening to the audience.

“I think a playwright who thinks that a production is supposed to be an execution of their vision is in for a bad life,” he says. “Once you put it in real time and with real people, it’s not supposed to be what’s in your mind.”

Haidle was tinkering all the way to the end this time, altering lines that weren’t working and adding dialogue for actors who now must cross the large stage of the Roundabout Theatre Company’s American Airlines Theatre.

“I find if an actor drops a line twice, maybe it doesn’t need to be there. If things sound gobbledygook in their mouths, if they make mistakes - malapropisms - that are better than what I wrote, I’m like, ‘Cool.’”

As COVID-19 rates spiked again this spring, Haidle found himself drafted to be an actor in his own play for understudy rehearsal.

“I’m a terrible actor. Awful,” he says, laughing. “I didn’t think about it as my play. I was like, ‘Come on give me more lines, man. My part could be way better.’”



Christopher Livingston, left, and Debra Messing appear during a performance of Roundabout Theatre Company’s “Birthday Candles,” a play by Noah Haidle. (Joan Marcus/Polk PR. Via AP)

Ritual, Memory, and the Meaning of a Life

BY DANIEL MILLHOUSE (BTE INTERIM MANAGING ARTISTIC DIRECTOR)

There is something quietly powerful about a ritual. A birthday cake. Candles flickering in the dark. The pause before a wish is made. In *Birthday Candles*, these small, repeated actions become the heartbeat of a life.

Each year, Ernestine Ashworth returns to the same ritual - measuring, mixing, baking, lighting. The steps are familiar, almost unchanging. And yet, each time, they mean something different. That is the paradox at the center of Noah Haidle's play: how something so constant can also be ever-evolving.

Rituals anchor us. They give shape to time, marking moments that might otherwise slip by unnoticed. In a world that moves quickly, they ask us to pause, to acknowledge where we are, who we are with, and what has changed since the last time we stood in this same place. For Ernestine, the act of baking her birthday cake is more than tradition; it is a way of locating herself within the vastness of her own life.

But rituals also carry memory. As the years pass in *Birthday Candles*, the space around Ernestine fills with echoes, of people who have come and gone, of conversations that linger, of versions of herself that no longer exist in quite the same way. The kitchen becomes more than a setting, it becomes a container for a lifetime. Each action holds the weight of what came before, even as it unfolds in the present.

This layering of memory is something we all experience. A familiar song, a scent, a simple action can transport us instantly, collapsing years into a single moment. Haidle captures this phenomenon with remarkable clarity, showing how the past is never truly gone. It lives alongside us, shaping how we see the present and how we imagine the future. And yet, *Birthday Candles* is not a play about nostalgia. It does not ask us to dwell in the past, but rather to recognize how memory and presence coexist. Ernestine continues forward, year after year, moment after moment, not because everything is preserved perfectly, but because life insists on being lived.

In this way, the play becomes a meditation on what it means to measure a life. Not in grand achievements or singular milestones, but in accumulation, in the repetition of small acts, the endurance through change, and the willingness to keep showing up, even when the meaning is not immediately clear. There is a quiet courage in that. To bake the cake again. To light the candles again. To make a wish, knowing that time will continue, with or without us.

And perhaps that is the greatest gift of *Birthday Candles*: the reminder that even the simplest rituals can carry extraordinary weight. That a single moment, repeated over time, can become a life. So when the candles are lit, we are witnessing the fragile, beautiful act of being alive, one year, one moment, one breath at a time.

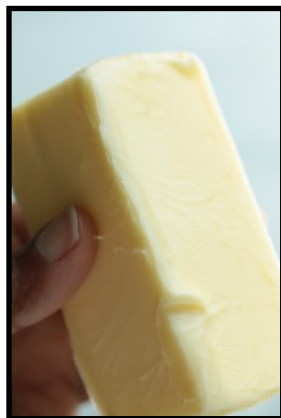
The Perfect Butter Cake

BY VINDI

Source: Vindi. "The Perfect Butter Cake." MyLoveOfBaking, 27 Jan. 2024, myloveofbaking.com/the-perfect-butter-cake/.

If someone asked me to choose a cake flavor that I loved the most, it would definitely be the good old butter cake. This butter cake recipe (that I still use) is what I grew up eating. This was my very first bake as a little girl and I baked it at every occasion. I started helping my Mom when she baked this cake (she was a busy working woman and didn't have the luxury of free time to bake) once in a while. It was the Sri Lankan New Year that we baked this cake mostly. I was no baker back then, nor was my Mom but this cake taught me a lot of techniques.

Years later at the bakery school when I actually got the chance to learn the science behind baking, I could not stop but think how accurate my Mom's lessons were. A butter cake may sound easy to make but trust me, there are many things that could go wrong if you didn't pay attention to details. I get a lot of question like, how to achieve a soft moist crumb, how to get the most flavor (cos no one likes a bland cake?), how not to burn the bottom or top, how to bake an even cake (without the dome in the center).



So this post is about answering all those questions and more. I will mention all the important steps with pictures as usual. And like I always say, recipe accounts for about 30% of the success. The rest is the baker!

So let's get started!

I always use salted butter, so I don't have to add salt later. If you use unsalted butter you will have to add 1/2 tsp of salt to the flour mix. Feel free to adjust the salt to your taste, you can taste the final batter and decide.

The important thing is that butter should be at room temperature. It should not be melting nor rock hard cold. Best way to achieve this is by leaving butter out of the fridge for a few hours (depending on the temperature of your kitchen).

Next is sugar. I use regular castor sugar. What I buy has a very fine granule. If yours is coarse, blitz it in a grinder to get finer particles.

Fine granules dissolve easily and makes creaming process faster.

Sift the flour along with baking powder a couple of times. This not only removes lumps but also incorporate air which helps give volume to the batter/cake.

I use all purpose flour for this recipe.

Like all other ingredients eggs have to be at room temperature too. If you keep eggs in the fridge, then you can leave them out for a few hours. A little trick is to submerge them in warm water for 10-15 minutes.





Either use full fat milk or buttermilk. Buttermilk yields a slightly more softer crumb. But I often use milk. You can add a splash of lemon juice to milk or use a few tablespoons of yogurt to get the same results. Make sure the milk/buttermilk is at room temperature.

First step is to cream butter and sugar. Use either a stand mixer or a hand beater. I prefer a stand mixer as it does a good job in mixing even a large quantity.

Use the paddle attachment and beat at a moderate speed. Make sure to scrape the bowl from time to time.

Keep beating until you get a nice airy batter. It should be lighter in color (much paler) and voluptuous. At this stage you can start adding eggs one at a time.

I never break the egg straight into the batter. Break it into a small container first and then add it to the batter. This way you can make sure you won't get any egg shells in the batter. Also, you'll save the batter from a rare case of bad egg.

Trust me this will make your life a lot easier.

Beat the batter in a consistent speed after every egg until the egg is fully incorporated.

The batter should be creamy, silky and fluffy without any curdling. If you feel like the batter has started to split (sometimes once you have added the last egg), add a table spoon of flour and mix on low speed or fold by hand.

Then it is time to add the flour and milk. Milk/buttermilk will help loosen up the batter as you keep adding flour. Mix on the slowest speed on your stand mixer. You can also fold by hand.

Add flour and milk alternating, starting and ending with flour.

Add only a splash of milk at a time and mix that well before adding flour. Scrape the bowl every now and then to make sure everything is fully incorporated.

Lemon zest, optional but recommended. Oil in the lemon zest gives the cake a nice scent.

You can even massage the zest into the sugar in the beginning so that the oils are extracted better. Use a fine zester like a microplane for better results

Finally add vanilla. Avoid using artificial/imitation flavoring if you can. Good quality vanilla essence does wonders to a simple cake like this.

Final batter should look like this. Super silky, smooth and lump free. It should have a considerable volume. If your batter does not look like this (if it has split or runny), then likely, the case is one of the ingredients was either too cold or too warm, or you did add eggs too fast or did not fold the flour correctly (over mixed).



It takes a little practice, experience and patience to make a great cake.

Let's talk a little bit about the tin/pan you bake the cake in. I always use good quality pans, that are steadily built and heavy. These pans transmit heat all around evenly helping the cake to cook and rise evenly.

While you can just get away with spraying the pan, it is always a good idea to line the tray with parchment. This will help removing the cake from the pan later.

Spread the batter evenly in the prepared pan. Make sure to leave no gaps or air pockets. Level the cake using an offset spatula. Finally, drop the tin on the kitchen counter a couple of times to force any air in the batter to come to the surface. This will prevent big holes forming in the crumb.

Your oven should be preheated by now. Never let cake batter sit in the pan for too long. I usually start preheating the oven when I begin to cream the butter and sugar.

Bake the cake in a preheated oven.

Conventional - 165°C(330°F) | fan-forced - 145°C(300°F)

May take about 50-55 minutes. But always check at 45 minute mark and decide. Every oven is different.

Once baked, leave on a wire rack. You can brush with sugar syrup to retain moisture. This is optional.

When cool enough to handle, lift the cake off the pan and leave to cool completely.

Some important things:

If you plan on brushing the top with sugar syrup, make a simple syrup while the cake is baking. Simple syrup: 1 part sugar 1 part water - boil and then simmer for a minute or two until slightly sticky. You can add flavoring to the syrup like lemon, vanilla, honey, strawberry etc.



Analysis Tools

Things to Think About Prior to Performance

- What makes a life meaningful? Is it defined by major accomplishments, relationships, daily routines, or something else?
- How do you personally mark the passage of time (birthdays, holidays, traditions)? Why are these rituals important?
- In what ways do people change over time, and in what ways do they stay the same?
- What does it mean to “live in the moment”? Is that something people can actually do consistently?
- How do memory and perspective shape the way we look back on our lives?

Things to Watch for in Performance

- This play spans many decades, often with minimal changes in setting. How do the actors, designers, and director communicate the passage of time? Consider costume, physicality, voice, lighting, and transitions.
- Notice the use of repetition throughout the play, especially surrounding birthdays and rituals. How does seeing similar moments repeated over time affect your understanding of the characters?
- Pay attention to Ernestine at different ages. What changes? What remains constant? How does the actor show growth, aging, or shifts in perspective?
- The play often moves quickly between moments in time. How do these transitions shape your emotional experience? Do certain moments feel more significant because of what comes before or after them?
- Consider the role of other characters in Ernestine’s life. How do relationships influence her journey? How do they reflect different ways of approaching life, love, and time?
- Notice how ordinary moments (conversations, baking, family interactions) are treated. What makes these moments theatrical or meaningful?

Things to Think About After the Performance

- What do you think the play is saying about the meaning of a life? Did your perspective shift at all while watching?
- Ernestine experiences both joy and loss over many years. How do these moments shape her understanding of life?
- Which moment in the play stood out to you the most? Why? How did it connect to the larger themes of the story?
- How does the play handle the idea of time passing? Does it feel fast, slow, overwhelming, comforting? Why?
- What role do rituals, like birthdays and traditions, play in the characters’ lives? Do they bring comfort, repetition, meaning, or something else?
- How do the relationships in the play evolve over time? What do they reveal about love, family, and human connection?

Other Analysis Tools

- What happens in the final moments of the play? Not just the last few minutes, but the final image or action. What does that moment suggest about the play's central message?
- If you had to describe the play in one word or phrase, what would it be? Why?
- The play focuses on seemingly ordinary moments rather than large, dramatic events. Why do you think the playwright made that choice?
- How might this story feel different if it were told in a different format (film, novel, etc.) instead of live theatre?
- What is the significance of the title *Birthday Candles*? How does it connect to the structure and themes of the play?

Additional Information

The running time for this production is approximately 90 minutes without an intermission.

Please join us for a pre-show discussion Thursday, May 7 at 6:45pm in MAC Room 117 (often referred to as the Fishbowl) preceding the preview performance. Note that the pre-show discussions will include the director and designers and will be a discussion on the approach to this production.

There will also be a post-show discussion following the Friday, May 15 performance. The post-show will be with the director, cast, and crew, and we will be fielding questions from the audience.

There will be an ASL Performance on Thursday, May 28. ASL Interpreters will be located near the stage for patrons who are deaf or hard of hearing, seated in an area of the theater that gives the best sight lines to follow the interpretation and the action on stage. To access received seating in view of the interpreters for a signed performance, call the Box Office at 630.942.4000 or 630.858.9692 (TDD).



From L to R: Alexander Wisniewski and Connie Canaday Howard (Photo by Rex Howard Photography)

Please join us!